
To Fight The Coronavirus, The World Returns To Fossil Fuels

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March 2020 will be the month the western world changed. As March began, there was relative normalcy except in China and isolated places in east Asia. By month's end, much of the west – indeed, the entire world – was in quarantine.

Entire nations have put their lives on lockdown as we try to “socially distance” ourselves to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In these unprecedented times, the world has returned to basic truths that manifest themselves when the price of ideology is too high. One of those involves fossil fuels. In an instant, sometimes without realizing it, the world has demanded fossil fuel products, and few concerns have been raised about their carbon footprint.

First among these truths is the production of surgical masks and other protective gear. Many of the best masks are made of polypropylene, clearly a fossil fuel product. With COVID-19 raging, there has been little to no discussion of going to less effective paper masks. The paper might have less climatic impact – although fewer trees also has a carbon footprint – but almost without exception, our medical personnel have determined that their health is more important to them than the abstract potential to affect climate change. Who can blame them?

Another example is the return of plastic bags at the local supermarket. Prior to the virus hitting, many markets announced they were stopping the use of plastics bags for their groceries. That didn't last long. It turns out, of course, that single use plastic bags are far cleaner than other bags people keep in their house, then bring to the market - carrying all the germs and viruses they've collected along the way with them. Now, not only are stores returning to fossil fuel based plastic bags, they are banning reusable ones from being brought in.

A third use of fossil fuels is the medicines we take. While little known outside the pharmaceutical industry, fossil fuels are the foundation for between 80% to 90% of the pharmaceuticals we use. As with surgical masks, when facing the stark reality of protecting a loved one through drugs that are carbon based or letting that loved one fend for him/herself in order to fight climate change, few choose the latter.

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Perhaps the most important aspect of the use of fossil fuels, however, has been the fact that we have the consistent energy supply that we need during this time to work remotely and to take care of our sick in the hospitals. As marvelous as solar, wind, and other similar technologies are, they remain intermittent. We have yet to determine how to store and transmit power when the sun doesn't shine or the wind doesn't blow. Without that consistent, reliable power supply - the overwhelming majority of which remains powered by fossil fuels - we in the west would have no chance to fight the virus.

Over the next few decades we will and should be working tirelessly to find new, cleaner ways to power our world, and to provide reliable power to the hundreds of millions who go without it. But before we make that leap into the unknown, and currently unproven, world of a society relying entirely on renewable energy, we should use this current crisis as a way to inject some realism into a debate that for too long has been driven by idealism.